

The Doomsday Dilemma

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HEAD LIKE A HOLE

Upon finally regaining consciousness, the first thing Peter Harper became aware of was that someone seemed to be drilling a hole into the top of his head. Searing pain shot through his brain like a bullet repeatedly ricocheting off the inside of his skull, followed by a slow creeping tinnitus, which started in low, but was soon up to a mile passed deafening.

Harper opened his eyes as best he could but just couldn't get his eyes to focus on anything around him, he could have been in a coffin or a concert hall for all he knew. He moved a little but was greeted with a tsunami of nausea for his efforts which threatened to knock him right out again. He mumbled something but the whole right side of his face was numb. Just like when he'd had his wisdom teeth out.

"Fuck..." Harper spat, and again was hit with nausea. He tried in vain to gather his thoughts. What the hell had happened? It seemed impossible, but the pain was worsening by the second. A shape moved in front of him, his sight was so poor it could have been anything. Harper tried to speak again but his pain-addled brain couldn't formulate the words into any coherent order, his mouth now felt like it was crammed full of marbles, threatening to choke him if he breathed too deeply.

Mercifully, the shape seemed to know what he was trying to say. "Ssh," it whispered above the screaming in his head.

"I've got something for the pain." *Thank Christ.* Harper motioned with his hand that it was his head. "No, don't." The blur warned harshly. "Careful, wait, wait, wait don't touch it whatever you do. Try not to move so much. Hold on a sec'. Here we go, take this, open wide."

The shape put what felt like a pill on Harper's swollen tongue and he gratefully swallowed it. He closed his eyes and tried to regulate his breathing. "That's good," said the shape sounding like it was speaking under water. "Just try and relax, it won't take long, it's very powerful. That's it. If you need to, there's a table just in front of you, lean forwards a little. There you go."

Harper blindly reached out and was surprised that the table was only a couple of feet or so away, he gripped on to the wood and miraculously, within only a few seconds the wonder drug started to kick in. The pain slowly lost its edge, then melted away altogether, as did the ringing in his ears and he could finally hear his own ragged breathing.

"Oh, God. Thank you." Harper said gratefully.

"Just take your time, breathe. How's that now?" The blur asked.

"Oh, Jesus, better, so much better, thank you, thank you," he replied. He looked up, adjusting his eyes to the light as part of his vision began to return somewhat. He found he could see better through his left eye, although it refused to offer anything other than soft focus, but his right

was like looking through petrol in a glass full of water, all multi-coloured swirls and shifting focus. He had been concussed once before, when he was a kid, and it had felt and looked a little like this.

A young Peter Harper had fallen off his bike and cracked his head on the pavement aged twelve, and that had earned him a night in hospital and he still had a vivid memory how it had messed with his sight, just like now. "I've been in an accident." He said plainly.

The shape sat down at the table opposite and once he was still, his features finally came in to some semblance of focus. He was a man, who looked to be in his mid-sixties he was casually dressed in an open necked white shirt and had a neatly trimmed grey beard, through which he was smiling benevolently. Harper knew the man from somewhere but couldn't quite place him. He didn't answer, but began studying Harper intently.

"I've taken a whack to the head." Harper slurred, at which the man cracked a grin.

"Huh? Oh, a whack? A whack and then some, I'd say." He replied cheerfully. "It's amazing you're conscious at all, let alone talking. How's the pain now?"

"All but gone, thank you." Harper looked around; he was in a rustic looking room, complete with oak beams and an open fireplace. "Where am I? This isn't a hospital."

"Don't you remember anything about what happened to you?" The man asked. Harper tried to think, but the combination of the drug and his head injury clouded his thoughts, making it increasingly hard for him to concentrate on anything but how good he felt all of a sudden, and he silently thanked the wonders of modern medicine. Still, he tried; He remembered getting to work at the lab as normal, where he worked as a security guard, so a road accident on the way was out of the question. But after that, nothing.

It was now that Harper noticed he was still in his security guard uniform, which was covered in dried blood. "Why am I still in my uniform? He asked. "This isn't a hospital. Am I still at the lab?" The man stroked his beard; if anything he had a look of wonderment about him. He shook his head slightly; more it seemed at Harper's condition than in answer to his question. "I'm covered in blood!" Dull panic tried to well up inside him, but was drowned out by the powerful sedative.

Finally the old man said. "It's amazing, there's no other word for it."

"Look at me, I'm covered in blood. Where the hell am I?" Harper demanded his pulse suddenly began to quicken now despite the sedatives seductive warmth. There was something terribly wrong here. He tried to push himself up from the table but his legs refused to support him. This was all wrong, he thought. "I need, I need a Doctor." But the old man

wasn't interested, he just continued perusing Harper. "I said..."

"Don't get agitated, you'll start the bleeding again!" The old man snapped and Harper instinctively touched the right side of his head, which was numb, his fingers came away sticky.

"Tut, there look, it's started again." The old man scolded as if he were speaking to a child picking at a scab. "No don't touch it!" He moved forwards across the table and adjusted something that was wrapped tightly around Harper's head, a bandage?

"I can't feel the right side of my head." Harper said dully and slapped the others hand away.

The old man almost laughed at this. "Christ! I'm not surprised," he said and sat back down.

"Who are you? What is this place, shouldn't I be in a hospital?" Harper was pleading now; the old man didn't seem quite so benevolent anymore.

The old man lent forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Take a look at my face. Don't you recognise me?"

"Jesus," Harper was sick of this game but knew there was nothing he could do for now. "I know you, from somewhere. Just can't think straight." He tried to fix him with a steady gaze, but his vision wouldn't co-operate, the right hand side of his face was normal enough, but the left was like a seething mass of melting wax.

"Fair enough, sorry." The old man said brightly. "I'm Doctor Logan; I work in research at the lab?" Bingo that was where Harper had seen him before. Logan was one of the boffins at the Ventrex research lab where Harper worked. "Ring any bells?" Logan asked. Harper nodded, he had seen Logan dozens of times wandering the corridors at Ventrex over the years. "And by your uniform I can assume you're one of our security guards. Your nametag says Peter Harper. Pleased to meet you, Peter Harper."

The drug Logan had given him had stopped Harper's growing agitation getting anywhere close to panic, but his mind was in a spin. He was clearly badly hurt, but wasn't in a hospital, or still at work. If anything the room looked like it was in a country cottage of some kind. And the man in front of him was showing no sign of concern for his injuries, let alone helping him. And was evading any questions Harper had about what exactly had happened to him.

Harper took a breath and fixed Logan with as steady a gaze as he could muster. "Listen, Doctor. Please, tell me what the hell is going on here. What's happened to me? Why am I covered in blood? And why the fuck aren't I in a fucking hospital!?" The tirade made Harper's head spin again.

"All in good time," Logan said in that same maddeningly calm detached way. "Just try to remain calm."

"Calm?" Harper spluttered in disbelief. "I'm covered in fucking blood! I can hardly see, and you're acting like this

is an everyday thing for you, you fucking lunatic!" Harper had to gasp for breath in between words, he could sense his head was throbbing but was thankful he couldn't feel it anymore. Judging by the blood and his numb face he could only imagine how badly he was hurt.

"I'm just saying, you'll do yourself a mischief thrashing about like that. In your condition." Logan said evenly.

"And what is my fucking condition?" Harper screamed in his face. "Why can't I feel the right side of my head?"

"Because it isn't there anymore." Logan replied. The response was issued so matter of fact, Harper was at a loss. All he could do was just gawp at the man.

It took Harper a good ten seconds to speak again, and when it came all he could muster was; "Wha'- What are you talking about?" He touched the wound on the side of his head which was spongy and slimy to the touch, he felt his fingers go deep into the numb flesh, deeper than was natural. He recoiled and immediately withdrew his hand, suddenly repulsed. "Ugh! That's disgusting. What the hell?"

Logan was still totally stoic. "I said leave it alone."

Harper felt nauseous, his head was swimming with a combination of the drug and the sheer lunacy of it all.

"What, was, that?" He stammered.

"You have about two and a half, three inches of skull missing on the right hand side of your head." Logan continued

in his even tone. "You just touched your exposed brain tissue through a gap in the bandage."

"Wha..." Harper could feel himself drifting off into unconsciousness again. Black blotches began to obscure his already fucked up vision. He was going to throw up or pass out. All he could manage was a faint. "Please..." Then he nearly toppled off his chair, but Logan was suddenly there at his side supporting him. "Please. Why aren't I in a hospital?" Harper asked. His voice sounded like it was at the bottom of a chasm, miles from his body. His vision was fading fast now until Logan was nothing more than a grey shape against the darkening black of the room.

"Hospital? No, I patched you up a bit. But to be honest I've been thinking that I'll just sit back and let nature take its course. See what happens."

The grey smudge that was speaking had almost completely merged with the darkness closing in on Harper. "You know," it continued. "It's nothing short of remarkable that you are not dead, Peter."

Harper thought he was dying, fading away from this nightmare. "What happened to me?" Harper's head lolled forwards as his remaining strength gave out. Nearly gone now, slipping into a darkness that was warm somehow and not cold as he would have imagined death to be. Not so bad. "Who, are you?" He asked as the darkness smothered him. Not so bad at all really; Dying.

"I told you, I'm Doctor Logan, I work at the lab, remember? Oh, and I'm the one who shot you in the head."

That should have shocked Harper into some sort of reaction, no matter how muted, but it barely registered more than a slight quickening of his fitful heart. He sensed more than felt Logan close by him in the murk, whispering into his one good ear.

"Shh, try not to die, Harper. Not yet. Don't you see this is just the beginning? There's so much I want to tell you, and it would be such a shame to lose you so soon. Harper?" The voice was as seductive as a king cobra's hiss to it's hypnotized prey. "Harper? Oh, well, I suppose it can wait until you come around again. If you do that is..." And with that Harper was gone.

MAKE CARS GO BOOM NOW

"EARTH FIRST, MOTHER FUCKERS!!!" Or at least that's what Jeff McManus thought the darkly dressed figure had shouted, as he was jumping up and down on the grass banking over at the other side of the March Dale Golf club car park. But the truth was it was hard for McManus to tell, as to be fair he couldn't hear much at all at the time.

The figure had then disappeared down the other side of the banking, only to emerge moments later on a black motor bike that tore across the eighteenth green (doing a couple of impromptu donuts that no doubt ripped up the delicate grass near the flag) and then finally disappearing off into the night. Its red tail light fading like the tip of McManus' dis-guarded cigarette.

It wasn't the fact that the figure had been wearing a ski mask that muffled the words he was shouting. It was more to do with the ringing in McManus' ears caused by the white Bugatti that had exploded mere feet from where he was standing at the time, the white Bugatti that was now laid burning on its roof close to where McManus was cowering.

And to think the evening had started out so sedately.

Jeff McManus had been working as a greens keeper at March Dale Golf club for the best part of three years now. And one

of the perks of the job that came along from time to time was earning extra cash lending a hand when there was a corporate dinner event at the club house. When the bigwigs could come and have a leisurely round of golf before heading over to the club house for an evening of over-priced dinner and drinks. Sure you had to dress smart in a shirt and tie and actually had to wear one of those puke coloured club blazers. But this was more than compensated for by the fact that the drunker the guests got, the bigger the tips got.

Tonight, March Dale Golf club was playing host to The Allied Chemicals board of Directors, who, so the story went, were out celebrating a high court victory. One of their factories in Thailand or some such far flung place like it, had allegedly been caught dumping highly toxic chemicals into the sea which had resulted in the death of the local fish population, and with it the fishing towns only source of income (save selling their land to Allied Chemicals, so that it could expand up the coast, thus tripling the earning potential of the area.) It had apparently been all over the news, with Allied Chemicals facing a clean-up bill in the hundreds of millions and certain bankruptcy.

But then, just as things were looking the bleakest, the companies grossly over-paid lawyers began to earn their obscene pay checks. The Prosecution's case, which up until then had been water tight began to spring a leak. The scientific reports on which so much of the case was based were

discredited (along with their authors) almost overnight. Key witnesses now refused to testify and so, like a blind kid playing Jenga in boxing gloves, the whole damn case came tumbling down. Heads rolled, politicians back tracked and in the end, the punishment, which should have been a death sentence for the corporation, was watered down into little more than a financial slap on the wrist.

The Allied Chemicals top brass had tearfully conceded some of the blame for the spill, but only that it had been a terrible, tragic accident and they had shown remorse to the tune of tens of millions of pounds to help put the damage right as best they could. And as a result their share price, which had been in the toilet weeks before, was now through the roof and beyond.

This new found profit, Allied agreed would partly go into the construction of a new improved plant, close to the site of the old one and so there would be more than enough new local jobs to go around. They even agreed to pick up the tab for a new school in the area, complete with an Olympic sized swimming pool and two (count them) two basketball/hockey courts.

And so what should have been a bill calculated in the hundreds of millions ended up barley into tens of millions. But what was an eye watering amount to mere mortals like McManus, was a cause for celebration to the board of Directors inside. And judging by the cars in the Clubs car park, it was

a financial hit they could easily afford. Indeed, earlier in the evening McManus and Sally, one of the clubs barmaids, had peered through the kitchen window as they arrived one by one and played an impromptu game of adding up the cost of each car as it arrived. But they had grown bored and not a little jealous when the figure had easily passed three quarters of a million. And that was before the chairman of the board had rolled up in his custom made Rolls Royce.

"Lucky bastards," McManus muttered under his breath as he looked out over the brightly lit car park. He rummaged in his blazer pockets for his cigarettes and lighter. The party inside was in full swing now, and once the speeches and endless smug back slapping had started, McManus had taken the opportunity to slip outside for a much needed nicotine hit.

He knew it wouldn't be long before the Allied chemicals elite would call it a day and move on to the next location to continue into the wee small hours, leaving in their wake the clean-up campaign which would begin in earnest and not finish until probably the wrong side of midnight.

But still, he could console himself with the extra cash that was already burning a hole in his pocket. The club had paid him double time for turning out tonight, plus he got to keep all the tips (fifty quid, in fives and tens which was a major result considering he was mostly just clearing tables) Sally and the other girls had fared even better, she had flashed him a smile as he passed her on his way out and the

wad of cash she had collected so far, must have been well over a hundred, just for keeping the drinks coming and ignoring the odd lecherous remark and arse slapping. Easy money.

Outside, the powerful spot lights that illuminated the car park like it was midday, glinted off the pristine paint work of the cars, pushing back the night which was pitch black where the Golf course stretch out beyond. A crash from the club house behind McManus made him jump and offer up a curse into the cool night air. He turned around to look in through the large window to see that one of the Allied Chemical suits had dropped a bottle of what looked like Champagne, much to the delight of his colleagues.

"Tossers," McManus breathed contemptuously and put a cigarette into his mouth and lit it. He took a long pull until his lungs ached then let the smoke drift lazily out through his nose. Better, he thought as he let out a soft sigh of contentment, the nicotine gave him a much needed buzz and he had just begun to formulate an idea how he could nip back inside and steal himself a couple of shots of the house's most expensive Bourbon.

That was when all hell broke loose in the car park behind him.

A massive explosion went off and he felt a flash of intense heat hit his back followed by the concussion of the blast which shook the whole front of the club house, the windows rattled violently and one pane close to where McManus

had been looking in cracked from high right, down to his low left.

McManus spat out his cigarette and spun around just as a flaming BMW looped up and landed on its roof with an ear shattering crash of smashed glass and twisting metal. All he could do was stare at the scene unfolding in front of him in slack-jawed awe as another car, a flash Jaguar XJS, exploded off to his left and was reduced to a nonsense of twisted body work in a heartbeat.

"What the fu-?" Was all he got out as one by one all the Allied Chemicals cars took it in turns to explode like some bizarre synchronized stunt show. McManus staggered forwards in a daze, mesmerized by the destruction. In little more than fifteen seconds seven obscenely expensive cars had gone up in flames right before his eyes.

That was when the three hundred and fifty grand Bugatti, he was just twenty feet or so from, joined them in a spectacular fire ball. The exploding super car flipped a perfect one eighty and landed smack on its roof. The blast knocked McManus sprawling into a nearby flower bed, one he personally had weeded that afternoon, his ears ringing like he had just had his head smashed between two cymbals, Tom and Jerry style.

With the world doing fiery back flips all around him, McManus somehow managed to struggle to his knees, his spinning head was filled with the piercing Beeeep of a hospital ECG

machine on flat line. The car park in front of him now resembled down town Gaza on a particular bad night, burning vehicles or what was left of them were shattered everywhere, bleeding flames and black toxic smoke up into the once peaceful night air.

If he could have gotten his thoughts together enough to utter anything even close to a coherent word, that word would have undoubtedly have been an expletive, but as it was all he would do was stare open mouthed at the destruction. And then, slap bang in the middle of the vehicular carnage, McManus' disbelieving gaze fell upon the Chairman of the Boards brand spanking new Rolls Royce, which was sitting untouched and majestic looking amongst the debris. And he wondered vaguely if the author of this mayhem was, in fact, a Roll Royce lover.

Through a fog of confusion, McManus began to slowly become aware of raised but muffled voices of alarm coming from the club house behind him and, still on his arse, he turned to see the expensive suited executives from Allied all with their faces, pressed close to the glass window, their mouths all opening and closing as they stared at the scene in disbelief. They looked for all the world like exhibits in some strange side show and out of nowhere a burst of near hysterical laughter escaped his lips.

"It wasn't me," he shouted to the strange collection and held his empty arms out as proof and slowly got to his feet. But they didn't seem to notice he was there, much less care

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